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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether teachers in different personality type groups respond to student writing in different, possibly predictable ways. Nine teaching assistants at Florida State University responded to student essays and took the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which measures several personality preferences. Using the MBTI scores, the teachers were divided into four groups: sensing-thinking, sensing-feeling, intuitive-thinking, and intuitive-feeling. Responses to the essays were used to examine what the teachers commented on and how they phrased their comments. Results indicated that personality type, along with teacher background, training, and other things, can affect responding styles. Further research may show a clear connection between teacher personality types and responding styles, allowing educators to gain a better understanding of some of the reasons people respond to English classes as they do. G. H. Jensen and J. K. DiTiberio report in their 1989 study that while most English teachers are intuitive, most people in the general population are sensing; hence it is possible that teaching styles conflict with the learning styles of many, if not most, of the students. Educators could remedy this problem by balancing teaching styles or at least by teaching the students to read and interpret their (the teachers') responses. (Seven figures and one handout describing teacher types are included.) (PRA)

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Introduction to Type Theory

To respond to student writing, teachers must do at least two things: 1) take in information from the writing, and 2) make decisions based on the information they take in. Jung's theory of personality type labels these two processes "perceiving" (taking in information) and "judging" (making decisions about that information). Further, type theory maintains that people have different preferred ways of perceiving and judging, and that those differences can help account for differences in behavior.

The two ways of perceiving, according to type theory, are called "sensing" and "intuition" (Figure 1A). When using sensing perception, we pay attention to our sensory experiences--what we see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. When using intuitive perception, we pay attention to things other than concrete information--to associations or hunches beyond the actual sensory data. Both kinds of perception are important, and we all can and do use both kinds depending on the situation. Nevertheless, type theory holds that we tend to prefer one kind of perception over the other--that we trust it more, use it more, and therefore become more adept at using it. It's rather like right- or left-handedness: most of us can use both hands, but we are more comfortable using one hand over the other, so we use that hand more often.

The two ways of judging are called "thinking" and "feeling" (Figure 1B). When using thinking judgment, we consider the facts impersonally and analytically in order to arrive at logical, objective findings. When we use feeling judgment, we assign personal values to the information at hand and make decisions based on those values. Feeling judgment does not refer to feelings or emotions, but rather to a decision-making process that weighs personal values as well as facts. As with perceiving, we sometimes use one judging process and sometimes use the other, but we tend to prefer one, so we use it more often.

Type theory holds that our preference for perceiving is independent from our preference for judging, so our preferred processes can combine to form one of four combinations, as indicated on Figure 2. Again, these groupings describe preferred ways of perceiving and judging; a person who prefers sensing and thinking is capable of using intuition and feeling, but is likely to use sensing and thinking more often. The handout gives brief descriptions of each of the four groups (see Handout).

Type theory suggests that, when responding to student writing, sensing teachers would tend to focus on different issues than their intuitive counterparts, and that feeling teachers would express their comments in different terms than thinkers would. In other words, sensing/intuitive differences are likely to show up in the "focus" of comments, and thinking/feeling differences are likely to show up in the "mode," or the way the

comment is phrased. Jensen and DiTiberio have already offered some evidence that writers in different type groups approach the writing process differently; what I wanted to know was whether teachers in different type groups responded to student writing in different, possibly predictable, ways.

Description of the Study

Nine teaching assistants at FSU agreed to participate in this study. On three separate occasions during the semester, each teacher responded to a student essay I provided as if it were turned in with a regular class assignment. I asked the teachers to respond to the same essays so I could compare how different teachers responded to the same pieces of student writing. On each of those occasions, the teachers also let me photocopy randomly selected student essays, three essays at a time, to which they had already responded for their own classes. Near the end of the term, each teacher also took the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator, which measures several personality preferences. The teachers knew that I would be looking at their comments in terms of personality characteristics, but that's all they knew of the study.

Using the MBTI scores for preferred ways of perceiving and judging, I divided the teachers into the four groups listed on the chart: ST, SF, NF, and NT. I used responses to the three common essays--the ones I provided--to look at what the teachers commented on and how they phrased those comments, and to look for trends within and between the different groups. I used the

responses to the regular class essays to see whether the trends I found were valid. In other words, the examples I'm about to cite are typical of trends I found both in three common essays and in the nine regular essays for each teacher.

Late in the study, I asked several more teachers to respond to the three common essays, to provide a more even distribution of teachers in each of the groups (Figure 3). Ultimately, I had the following distribution of teachers: 2 each in the ST, SF, and NF groups, and 6 in the NT group. I took the responses to each essay, grouped them by type, and looked for patterns in focus and mode of teacher responses within and between groups.

Results

Some representative responses to a sample essay illustrate some of the differences between the groups (Figure 4). I'll start with end comments for one essay, and we'll look at margin comments for other essays later. The assignment for this essay was, "locate yourself within the college experience." In the essay I selected, the student discusses various opportunities college opens up, but most teachers seemed to find the various paragraphs disjointed, or not quite tied together. Mechanical errors are fairly common.

Nina's comment, though quite brief, illustrates a fairly typical feeling approach; she tries to make contact with the student at a personal level: "I enjoy much of what you say and can identify with the struggle." The mode is personal, what Elbow calls "reader-based feedback." Almost immediately, though,

she asks for more facts, a focus typical of sensing types: "I would have liked to know more about why college isn't what you pictured it in 7th grade."

Compare Nina's response to that of Henry, a sensing-thinking teacher. He isn't concerned about making contact with the student; he's concerned about making contact with the facts: "We [need] a better sense of what exactly you mean here. . . . What do you mean by 'what I've done with my education'?" He approaches the essay objectively and analytically, identifying points that are inadequately explained, and asking questions to elicit the missing information. Like Nina, he wants to get more facts on the table.

Curt, on the other hand, sees plenty of information already available. An intuitive-thinking type, he sees the facts as "puzzle pieces"--pieces that might fit together in any of a variety of ways. He identifies the major themes in case the student missed them, and he steps back and identifies the problem--the "connections, which lie beneath the surface" need to be made more explicit. He then offers a possible solution: he tells the student she might "choose just two of the themes to focus on and find a reconciliation." He does offer the student a strategy, but it's not a blueprint--in other words, he doesn't tell her the one, "correct" way to revise her essay, but he does give her a direction to pursue.

Finally, we come to Felicia's intuitive-feeling comment. As an intuitive like Curt, she looks at the Big Picture, but as a

feeler like Nina, she first reaches out to the student by saying she "enjoyed reading" the essay, then assures the student that "the way you admit that you're still puzzling through what college means to you is very effective." And look at what she does next: she explains the impression she got from the essay. That's a very intuitive thing to do--to be guided by her impression rather than by the explicit information on the page. And when she does make a judgment, notice how she qualifies it: "I'm not sure." That's a good example of feeling judgment at work, being careful not to step on the student's toes.

Now let's look at some margin comments (Figure 5). Here we see the average number of praise comments--comments such as "I like your intro," "nice image," "good point," or "this works well"--that the teachers included on each essay. While none of the thinking types gave as many as two such marginal comments per essay, three of the four feeling types gave more than two; in fact, half of them gave more than four praise comments per essay. I suspect that these teachers look for positive things to say--an opportunity to respond in a praising mode--as a way of assuring students that they are on the right track. I doubt that the thinking teachers are insensitive; they're just more focused on identifying problems and getting to work on them, so praise is naturally less common. Karen, one of the ST teachers, put it this way: "I don't learn a lot from being praised and patted on the head." Another teacher (who was not in the study), after looking at several sets of end comments, expressed a similar

view: she said that the thinking teachers' comments seemed more useful, since they got right down to the business of making the writing better. She added that she had little use for praise, since she saw it as having little value for helping students improve their writing.

Let me pause here to say that I'm not making value judgments about different styles of responding. In fact, type theory is predicated on the conviction that all types have strengths, so all types have something to offer. Teachers of all types can make "good" comments, just as teachers of all types can make "bad" comments. What I want to point out with these teachers' observations, however, is that different teachers seem to have different agendas with their responding, and I think those agendas may be related to personality type. I want to suggest that if we recognize a tendency toward an extreme style of responding, we might be able to adjust that style, to balance it, in order to reach more students, or we might alert students to our agendas in order to help them read our comments more effectively.

Now let me illustrate what seems to be another trend in the mode, or phrasing, of teacher comments (Figure 6). Fairly early in one of the essays, the student used the title of a magazine, Cosmo, without underlining it. Neither of the ST teachers commented on the error, and though all five of the NT teachers who marked any textual errors corrected it, none of them added further comment. Three of the four feeling teachers, however,

both corrected the error and offered explanations for why they did it.

Those responses seem in character: the thinkers didn't waste their time explaining the obvious, but the feelers insisted on letting students know why they marked what they did. Felicia, the one feeling teacher who didn't mark this particular error, was extremely consistent in explaining the reasoning for any marks she made. She said that, as a rule, if she took the time to mark something, she also took the time to explain why she marked it. Her papers were filled with such comments--"you need a comma," "misspelling," "use two hyphens to make a dash." I didn't find that any group seemed particularly more or less attentive to errors--only that the feeling teachers were more likely to explain their marks and corrections.

When we look at the focus of marginal comments, I think the differences are a bit harder to see--maybe because most marginal comments refer to a small unit of text, and sensing comments typically refer to a small unit of text, so most marginal comments tend to look pretty sensing. Nevertheless, I think I see evidence of a sensing/intuitive difference even in the margins: specifically, in the kinds of changes teachers make in student texts. While all groups marked mechanical errors to some extent, the sensing teachers seem more likely than the intuitives to mark the precision of the students' wording (Figure 7). For example, in an instance where a student wrote that something was "totally unnecessary," three of the four sensing teachers marked

the word "totally": two crossed it out, and one circled it. (The one who circled it, an SF, also wrote "WC" by way of explanation.) This focus on expression is consistent with the description of sensing types: they want the facts, and they want them clearly and concisely. One sensing teacher gave me her list of "words to get rid of"--words that took up space without providing any information--and said that "precision" was something she valued highly. That's not to say that intuitives don't attend to precision, but to suggest that they may attend first to other issues.

In fact, not a single intuitive teacher marked the word "totally" in the example just mentioned. Again, this behavior seems consistent with type theory's predictions: if they are looking primarily for patterns and connections, they are more likely to fill in missing words or mentally cross out unnecessary ones than to question the appropriateness of any single word.

Conclusion

While it's unrealistic to make any claims based on the few indicators I found, I do think that my admittedly limited data suggests that further research into type-related differences in teacher response styles is justifiable. To identify those tendencies more accurately, we need to refine a method of classifying responses in ways that we can usefully discuss, and we need to work with larger populations of teachers or with in-depth studies of small populations.

Let me close with two final observations. First, if further

research does show connections between teacher personality types and responding styles, and perhaps between type and other teaching behaviors, we may gain a better understanding of some of the reasons people respond to English classes as they do. Jensen and DiTiberio report that among college English teachers, intuitives outnumber sensing types by 9 to 1, while in the general population, sensing types have a 3 to 1 majority. It's possible that our teaching styles conflict with the learning styles of many, if not most, of our students. If so, we might reach a larger audience by balancing our teaching styles, or at least by teaching our students to read and interpret our responses.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I don't mean to suggest that personality type alone can account for responding styles. Even in the small sample of teachers with whom I worked, I could see that teacher background and teacher training affect responding styles--we tend to teach the way our teachers taught, or the way we were taught to teach. Further, institutional and environmental pressures can also affect the way we respond: for instance, the pressure to help students pass a five-paragraph exit exam could make teachers focus on issues of form and correctness to which they would otherwise give much less attention. I suspect there may be other factors at work as well. Nevertheless, I think that further study of the connections between personality types and responding styles can give us some valuable insight into why we respond the way we do.

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WAYS OF PERCEIVING

Sensing

Uses five senses
to gather facts:
emphasis on what
is "really there"

Intuitive

Looks for meanings,
relationships, and
possibilities: what
"could be there"

Figure 1A

WAYS OF JUDGING

Feeling

Incorporates personal values
into decision-making



Thinking

Bases decisions on
impersonal logic

Figure 1B

TEACHER TYPES

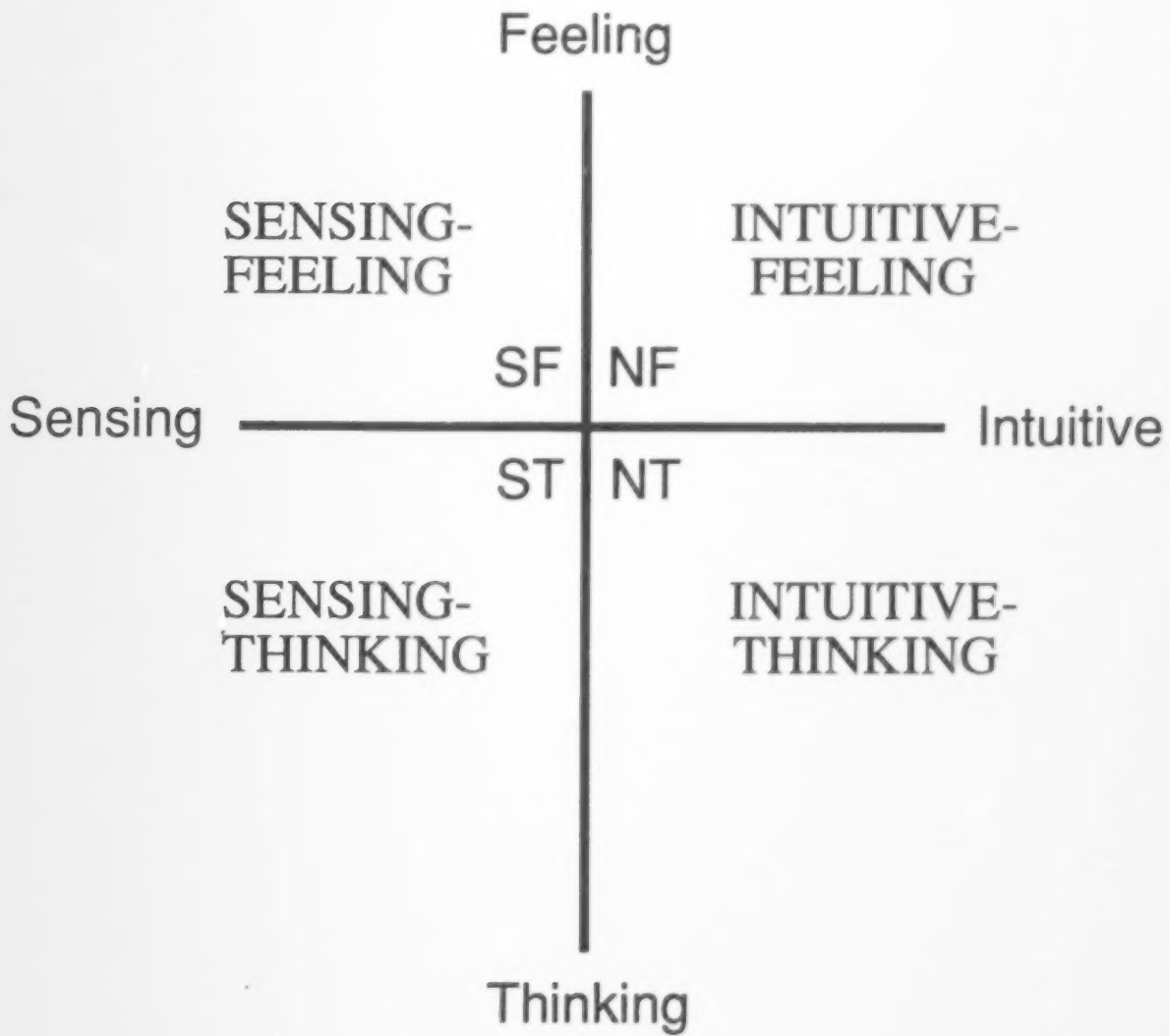


Figure 2

DISTRIBUTION OF TEACHERS BY TYPE

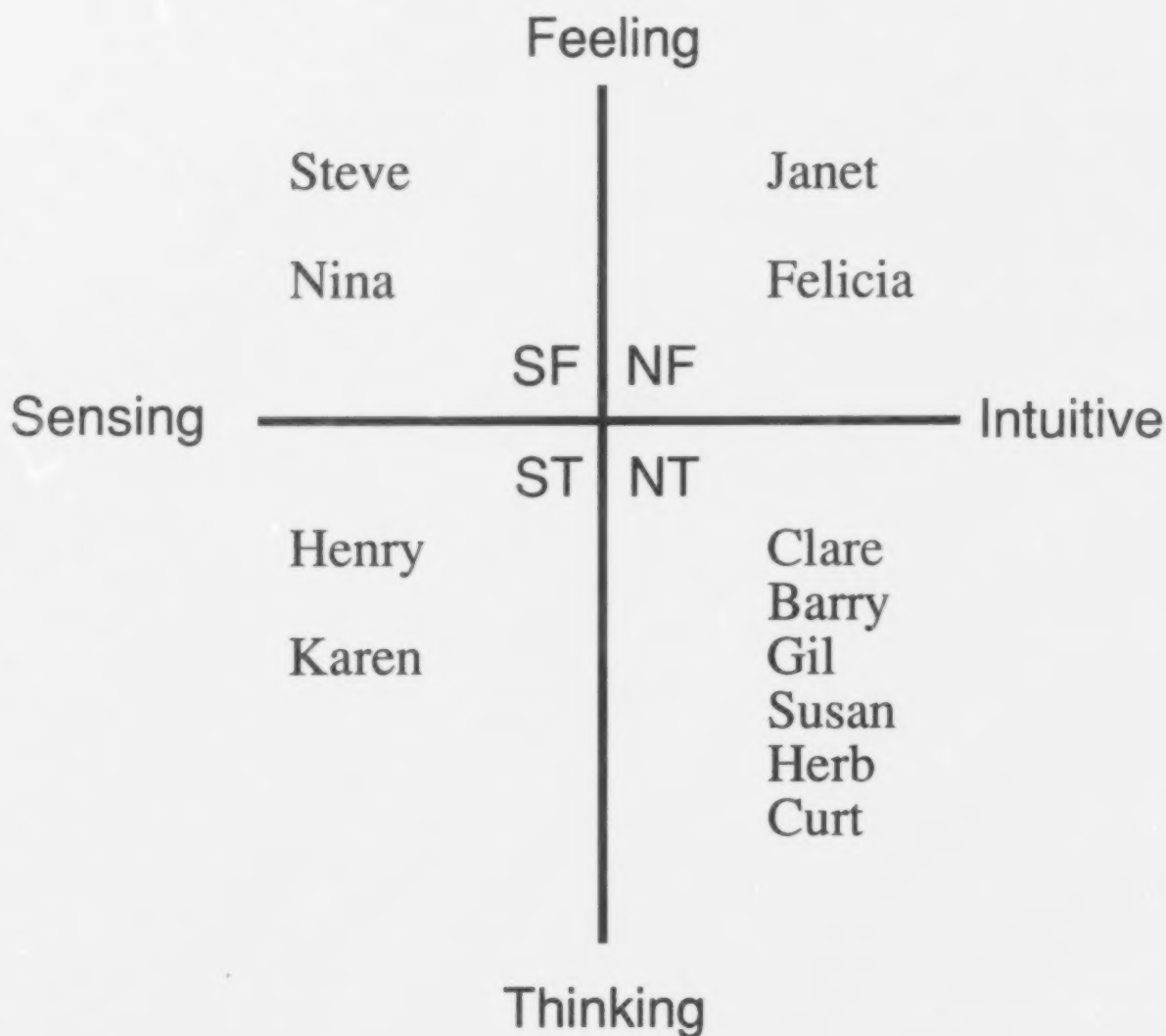


Figure 3

NINA:
(Sensing-Feeling)

Mandy, I enjoy much of what you say and can identify with the struggle of what is the University experience. However, I would have liked to know more about why college isn't what you pictured it in the 7th grade.

Remember to proofread your paper before turning it in.

FELICIA:
(Intuitive-Feeling)

Mandy, I enjoyed reading your essay. You say a lot of interesting, thoughtful things about your expectations of what you thought college would be like. And, as I've noted, I think the way you admit that you're still puzzling through what college means to you is very effective.

As I read your essay I got the impression that you didn't know where you were going, that you discovered what you thought as you wrote. You might consider revising your essay with a central point in mind. As it is now, I'm not sure the essay holds together as a coherent piece. If you are trying to show how college is different from what you expected, why not state that explicitly at some point in the paper?

HENRY:
(Sensing-Thinking)

Mandy, good idea, but I'd like to see you work this out further so that we can get a better sense of what exactly you mean here. What do you mean by "what I've done with my education"? Does this mean internally? in terms of outward success? I think you've got a good start here--but you need to go a bit deeper into what you're saying. What you mean by "success" seems to be a crucial point to be clear on. And if college mean success for you--how so? because of a diploma? an attitude of accomplishment? what?

CURT:
(Intuitive-Thinking)

Mandy: This is thoughtful and serious. You get several important pieces of your "puzzle" out on the table here. In the next draft, you might try to see how these pieces might fit together. As noted on page 2, the major themes here (adulthood, success, freedom, partying) each seem restricted in their separate paragraphs. The connections, which lie beneath the surface at the moment, are what can provide the unified point that would give this a sense of resolution. Could you choose just two of the themes to focus on and find a reconciliation?

Figure 4

AVE. # OF PRAISE COMMENTS PER ESSAY

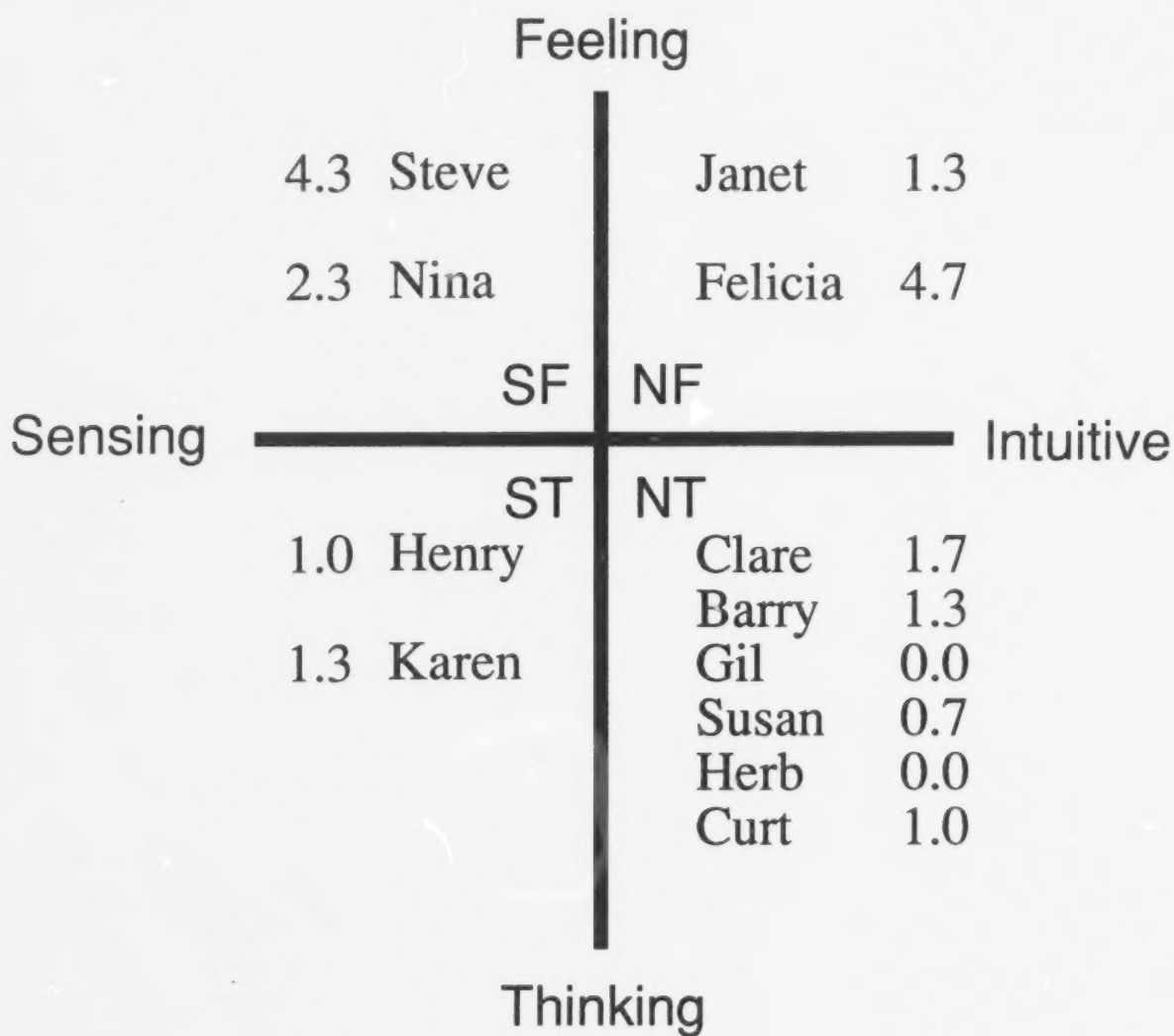


Figure 5

RESPONSES TO A MECHANICAL ERROR

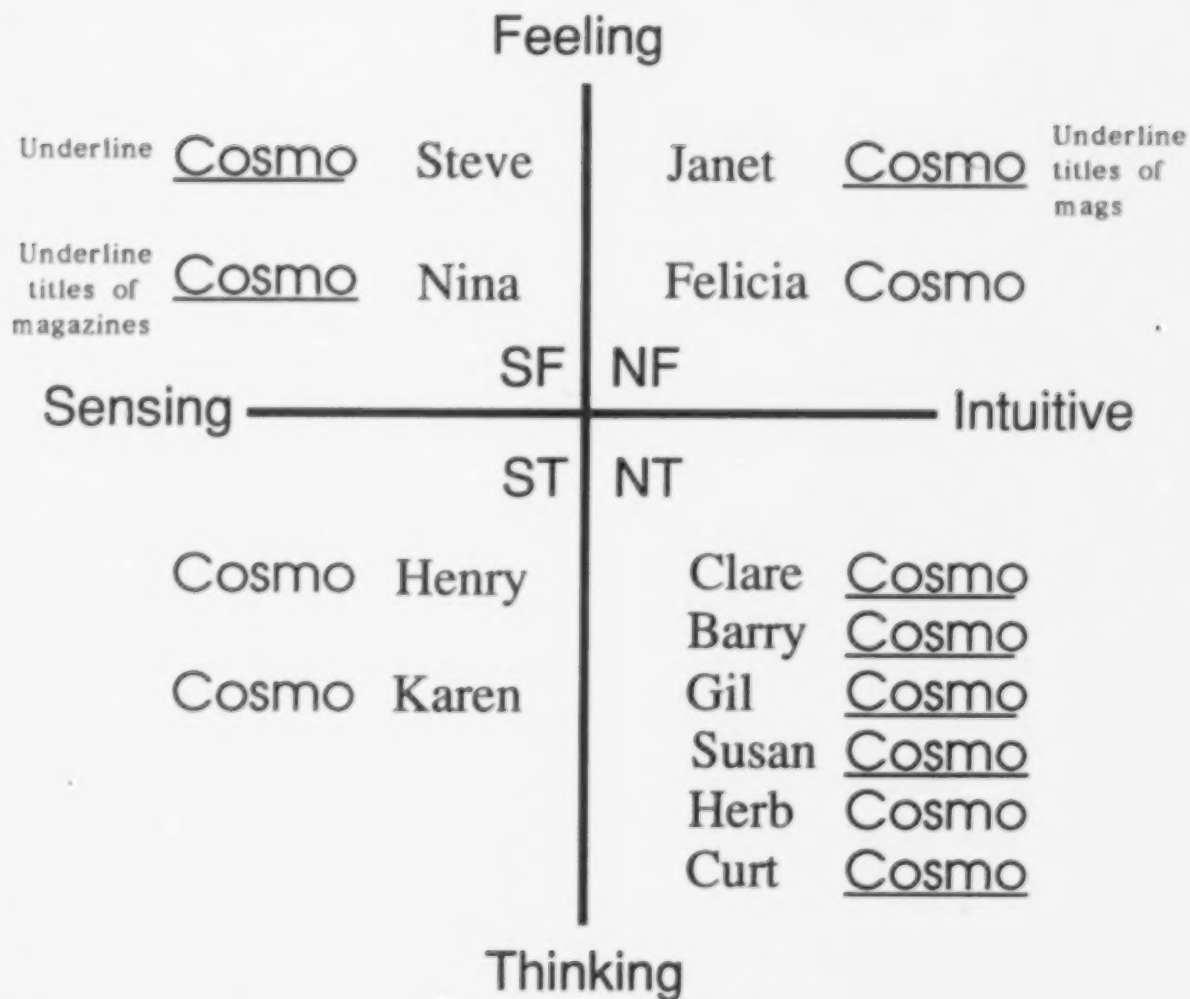


Figure 6

RESPONSES TO AN UNNECESSARY WORD

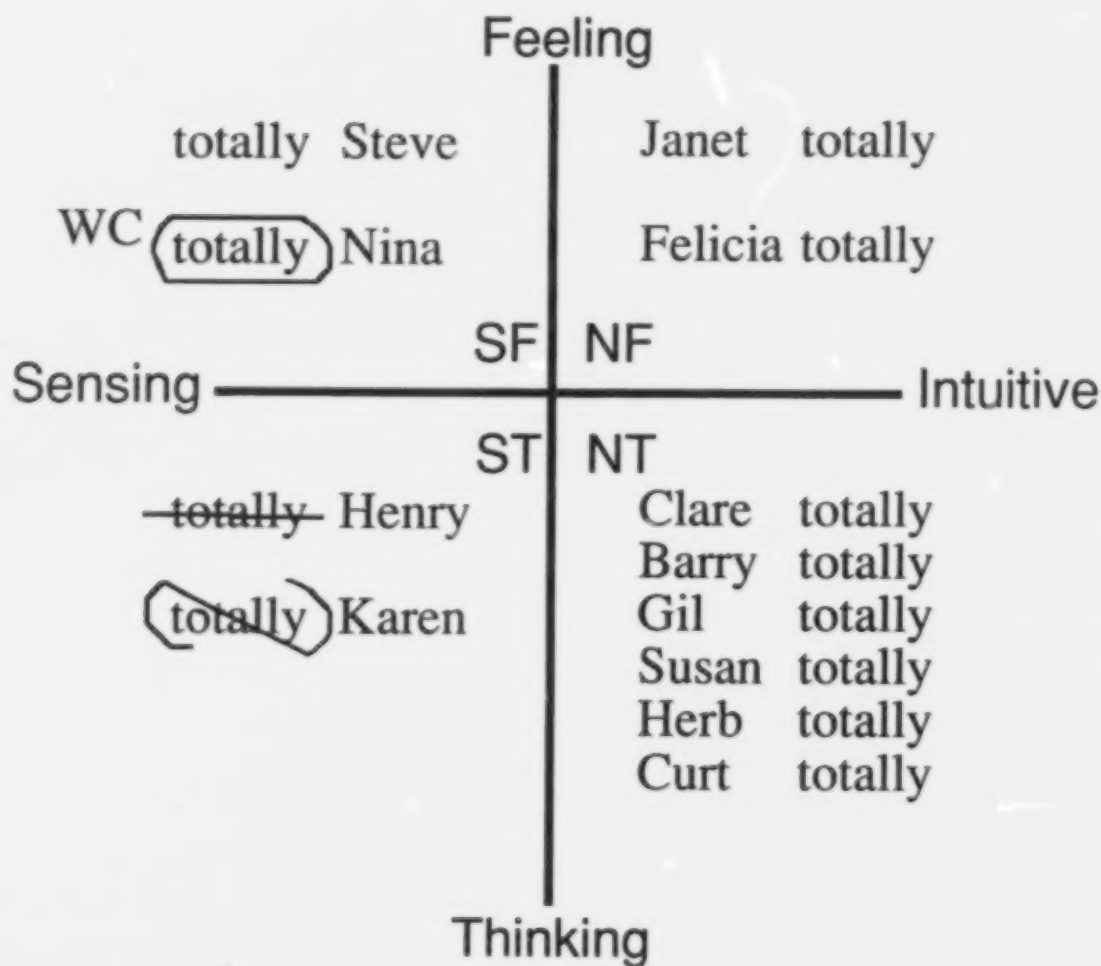


Figure 7

BRIEF DESCRIPTIONS: TEACHER TYPES

SENSING - FEELING

SF people are interested in facts, and they consider personal values when making decisions about those facts: they weigh how much things matter to themselves and others. They tend to become sympathetic and friendly. They tend to be good at:

- *keeping up with details
- *being realistic
- *attending to the present
- *being thorough
- *telling how others feel
- *being persuasive
- *meeting obligations

INTUITIVE - FEELING

NF people are interested in possibilities, especially possibilities for people, and they make their decisions with personal warmth. They tend to become insightful and enthusiastic. They tend to be good at:

- *bringing up possibilities
- *giving their best effort
- *improvising
- *getting things done
- *understanding others
- *working with people
- *persevering

SENSING - THINKING

ST people are also interested in facts, but they make decisions about those facts using impersonal analysis: a step-by-step movement from cause to effect. They tend to become practical and matter-of-fact. They tend to be good at:

- *being practical
- *analyzing facts
- *attending to details
- *organizing
- *weighing evidence
- *being consistent

INTUITIVE - THINKING

NT people are interested in possibilities, but they make decisions objectively and analytically, often choosing theoretical or technical possibilities, ignoring the human element. They tend to become logical and ingenious. They tend to be good at:

- *theorizing
- *analyzing possibilities
- *staying informed
- *considering alternatives
- *solving problems creatively
- *being resourceful